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Political and Social Issues in French Digital Games, 1982–1993

Abstract

Despite numerous publications about the history of digital games in the United States and Japan, there are few studies which aim to explore the past European trends in game design. For example, the French gaming industry remains unknown to the vast majority of game researchers. However, from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s a certain tendency emerged in this industry: political and social issues became overtly discussed within digital games. To examine such a tendency, the author follows the ‘emancipatory’ paradigm in digital game research (to cite Jaakko Suominen), instead of the ‘enthusiast’ Trans-Pacific-oriented ones. The objects of the analysis are several adventure games developed in France between 1982 and 1993 whose popularity during this period made them influential for the development of the French gaming industry. The author indicates three factors that contributed to the rapid growth of adventure games. These are the advancement of the personal computer market, the modest but existing support from French national institutions, and the article published by Guy Delcourt in the August 1984 issue of *Tilt* gaming magazine, which gave critical insight into previous development practices and suggested drawing inspiration from current events. The author distinguishes five thematic genres: Froggy Software’s avant-garde digital games, postcolonial and feminist games, investigative games, science fiction, and horror. Each of these provided numerous references to political affairs, economic stagnation and postcolonial critique of the past, which were severe issues in France during the 1980s and 1990s. Despite strong genre diversity, French adventure games shared similar pessimistic outlooks on the emerging “liquid modernity” (Zygmunt Bauman), during which France had to cope with more unstable work conditions, globalization, and immigration from the Maghreb countries. Because the French gaming industry in this period concentrated on local gamers and referred to their national culture, the author encourages game historians to turn their attention not only to Trans-Pacific games, but also to those

manufactured outside Japan and the United States.

Key words: French video games, Video games in France, Video games history, Postmodernity, Liquid modernity

Introduction

In 1982, Japanese players encountered an arcade game whose gameplay revolved around an escape from a prison mine with stolen bags of gold. At first glance, the program resembled several mechanics from Japanese blockbusters; for example, the player could temporarily knock enemy guards unconscious with a hammer, similar to the famous *Donkey Kong* (1981, Nintendo). However, *Le Bagnard* (*The Convict*)—the name of the product—originated not in Japan or the United States, but came from a French company, Valadon Automation. Moreover, the program featured one of the first animated endings in games history, in which a guard chasing the player’s avatar is dazed while approaching the edge of the screen.

This introduction reminds us how neglected the European history of digital games is in the gaming discourse. Books, articles, and academic papers which discuss the development of global gaming culture focus primarily on the dominant American and Japanese industries. Thus, numerous minor narrations involving other countries are excluded¹. This problem results from a paradigm which Jaakko Suominen calls “enthusiast”. As Suominen writes, amateurs and journalists struggle to define the master narration about the development of their favourite cultural products. The emergence of the new, “emancipatory” paradigm allows us to challenge the enthusiast narration on the industry and include the voices of women, ethnic minorities, and other countries as well².

This paper is an attempt to propose an emancipatory narration concerning digital games. The following analysis will concentrate on the history of the French gaming industry between 1982 and 1993. The period suggested marks the edition of the gaming magazine *Tilt*, one of the most significant French periodicals about video games. Between 1982 and 1993, the position of the French gaming industry changed, starting from the Trans-Pacific distribution of arcade games, and ending in the highly advanced development of games. During that time, one can note an essential number of digital games relating to the socio-political situation in 1980s France. Taking into account that—as Soraya Murray writes—digital games are “complex, fully formed visual media [...] suited to nuanced ideological deconstruction”³, I will concentrate

¹Oliver Pérez Latorre, “The European Videogame: An Introduction to Its History and Creative Traits”, *European Journal of Communication* 28:2 (2013), pp. 136–151.

²Jaakko Suominen, “How to Present the History of Digital Games: Enthusiast, Emancipatory, Genealogical, and Pathological Approaches”, *Games and Culture* (2016), pp. 8–10.

³Soraya Murray, *On Video Games, The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (I.B. Tauris: London and New York) (2017), p. 105.

on several tendencies which played a part in French game design during the given period.

The objects of the analysis below will be games developed in France between 1982 and 1993 which belonged to the genre called “adventure games”. In this article, an “adventure game” will be defined as a game which involves game world exploration (either in a first-person or third-person perspective), narrative⁴, and problem-solving⁵. Although the period above also featured many French arcade and sports games, these narrative-based games had the highest importance in the national gaming industry at that time. As one of the leading personas of the French gaming industry, Muriel Tramis, sums up, between 1982 and 1993 “[t]here was a ferment of ideas and lots of originality. France loves stories”.⁶ Several French adventure games were not devoid of bonds with local socio-political events.

The Prologue

From the beginning, the reader should know the background of the appearance of French adventure games. Before 1982, the French gaming industry did not exist. Although the 1960s marked the appearance of the first academically developed digital games, they were only board game adaptations intended for academic use. Therefore, the consumers of the French entertainment industry—similarly to the whole of Western Europe—did not experience digital games until the international success of *Pong* (1972). Its American developer, Atari, quickly dominated the arcade machines trade and the console market with their product Home Pong. Despite several French attempts to participate in gaming hardware production, such as the creation of Société Occitane d’Electronique in 1977, the local market was eventually taken over by American and Japanese productions⁷.

This situation began to change in 1982 when Valadon Automation produced the aforementioned *Le Bagnard*. Subsequently, several factors helped French developers to appear on the scene. Firstly, the international arcade and home console market experienced a crisis, due to the poor quality of games made by anonymous programmers. At the same time, microcomputers became more successful as hardware which effectively combined entertainment and office use. The growing

⁴ Espen Aarseth provides an explanation of the term “narrative” in games, which means, according to him, the presence of kernels (“events that define a particular story”) and satellites (“supplementary events that fill out the discourse”) in a particular game. See Espen Aarseth, “A Narrative Theory of Games”, in *FDG '12 Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*, eds. Magy Seif El-Nasr, Mia Consalvo and Steven Feiner (Raleigh, North Carolina: ACM) (2012), p. 130.

⁵ The definition above includes the mutations of the genre: RPG adventures (games based on experience points and fights with enemy characters, which also feature problem-solving), and action-adventures (games requiring reflexes and problem-solving).

⁶ Cf. Tristan Donovan, *Replay: The History of Video Games* (Lewes: Yellow Ant) (2010), p. 128.

⁷ Alexis Blanchet, “France”, in *Video Games Around the World*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (Cambridge: MIT Press) (2015), pp. 175–179.

demand for personal computers saw an increase in sales, from 70,000 in 1982 to 204,000 in 1983⁸. This factor coincided with the expansionist politics of the then President François Mitterrand. Mitterrand's government took several significant steps to nationalizing the most prominent domestic industries and accelerating the computerization of the country. After acquiring an electronic manufacturing company, CII-Honeywell-Bull, in 1982, the French government began to produce its line of domestic microcomputers, the Thomson MO5 and the TO7. Those undertakings aimed to boost economic growth, as knowledge about operation of personal computers at home and in schools and enterprises became necessary to French society⁹.

The popularization of PCs in households went hand in hand with an increasing number of programming experiments. At first, programmers developed games for their own satisfaction. However, some of them tried releasing their products through emerging software houses. The first ones (Ére Informatique, Infogrames, Loriciels) were created in 1983, and they immediately published the works of individual authors. At the time, as Blanchet claims, the game publishing process resembled book publishing: programmers were independent of publishers, rather than working for them¹⁰.

However, the first French games developed on personal computers suffered from a lack of creativity. Between 1983 and 1984, imitations of international arcade hits such as *Space Invaders* (1977, Taito) and *Pac-Man* (1982, Namco) flooded the French digital games market. Programmers such as Carlo Perconti and Bertrand Raval manufactured titles which rarely differed from games produced in the United States and Japan. The poor quality of such copies prompted French journalist Guy Delcourt to write an article *The golden egg chip* (*La puce aux œufs d'or*), which was published in the Summer 1984 issue of *Tilt* gaming magazine. Delcourt suggested that French programmers should reconfigure the design of their productions, making more references to reality: “So be prepared for a challenge. Try finding personal ideas, new approaches, unpublished themes that you can draw, for example, from current events”¹¹.

Delcourt did not specify what “current events” he meant, though British historian Tristan Donovan suggests that the article encouraged game designers “to create something more personal, more rooted in reality, more French”.¹² Citing his compatriot Jonathan Davies¹³, Donovan highlights a significant difference between British and French players in the 1980s. As Donovan says, whereas British consumers relied on arcade-style games employing high fantasy settings, players from France preferred graphic adventure games. He also writes that French design soon began to

⁸Anonymous, “Le micro ca boum”, *Tilt* 17 (1984), p. 8; Guy Delcourt, “Le grand chambardement”, *Tilt* 19 (1985), p. 24.

⁹Joëlle Ilous, “Le coq se rebiffe”, *Tilt* 8 (1983), pp. 32–33.

¹⁰Alexis Blanchet, p. 180.

¹¹Guy Delcourt, “La puce aux œufs d'or”, *Tilt* 14 (1984), p. 18.

¹²Tristan Donovan, p. 128.

¹³Jonathan Davies, “Why are French games so weird?”, *Amiga Power* 6 (1991), pp. 74–77.

specialize in games with sophisticated puzzles and a strong emphasis on aesthetic values, including references to local comic books known as *bandes dessinées*¹⁴.

1984 also marked the first signs of acknowledgment that digital games received from several institutions. France's Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, while in office from 1981 to 1986, attempted to decentralize national cultural development and treat popular culture (like rock music, comic strips, and others) as art. Digital games were also within reach of these politics, and the newly formed governmental agency, Octet (established in 1983), tried to support game development in France. In 1984, Octet held a competition for the best French game. The winner was Marc Cecchi's high fantasy game *Mandragore* (*Mandrake*; 1984, Infogrames)¹⁵. Impressed with the results of the contest, Lang announced grants for other distinguished projects. The winners of the grants, including highly innovative crime game *Opium* (Ludorinique, 1986) about the Shanghai drug trade in the 1930s, were fully subsidized by the government. The agency fell apart shortly after, though, and Lang's plans to organize a similar contest in later years were thwarted by political changes in 1986, which led to his departure for two years¹⁶. Also in 1984, *Tilt* organized the first of its prestigious prize-giving ceremonies, Tilt d'Or. One French game set in the Middle Ages, *L'Aigle d'Or* (*The Golden Eagle*; 1984, Loricels) by Louis-Marie Rocques, received the Best Adventure Award, and the national cable television channel, Canal+, transmitted the subsequent ceremonies. In competition, Apple organized its modest business award, the Pomme d'Or¹⁷. Its recipient *Paranoïak* (*Paranoia*; 1984, Froggy Software), programmed by Jean-Louis Le Breton, received critical acclaim due to its originality, resulting from its contemporary settings.

Froggy Software

Paranoïak was the first game created by Froggy Software, an independent studio established in Paris by Le Breton together with Fabrice Gille. Le Breton, a self-declared left-wing activist who had been involved in the 1968 student protests, expressed a desire to make games that reflected current events. Collaborating with Parisian students such as Clotilde Marion, Chine Lanzmann, and Tristan Cazenave, he suggested a satirical approach to articulate social criticism. The catchphrase invented by them, which indicated critical factors of their games, was "aventure, humor, décalage et déconnade" ('adventure, humour, discrepancy, and prank')¹⁸.

¹⁴Tristan Donovan, pp. 126, 128–129.

¹⁵Anonymous, "Les préférences de Jack Lang", *Science et Vie Micro* 13 (1985), p. 27.

¹⁶See also Guillaume Montagnon, "L'intégration du jeu vidéo dans une politique publique dans les années 1980: le cas de l'agence Octet", in *Les supports du jeu vidéo* (Paris: Université Paris 13) (2015), p. 20; Anonymous, "Pour développer et produire...", *Jeux & Stratégie* 37 (1986), p. 52.

¹⁷Anonymous, "Tilt d'Or", *Tilt* 17 (1984), p. 47; Anonymous, "Pomme d'Or telematique", *Science et Vie Micro* 14 (1985), p. 13.

¹⁸Jean-Louis Le Breton, "L'histoire de Froggy Software", *Jean-Louis Le Breton*, http://www.jeanlouislebreton.com/L-histoire-de-Froggy-Software_10_20.html, date accessed 15 July 2017.

The combination of satire and seriousness which characterized *Paranoïak* coincided with growing public dissatisfaction with Mitterrand's social politics. The nationalization reforms failed to increase economic prosperity and forced the first Socialist Prime Minister under Mitterrand, Pierre Mauroy, to curb public expenditure due to rising inflation and national debt. With stubbornly high unemployment, these factors eventually caused him to resign¹⁹. *Paranoïak* was one of the first games to capture the gloomy atmosphere of the time. The game follows a lonely widower suffering from numerous mental and cognitive disorders such as amnesia, Oedipus complex, and claustrophobia. While issuing text commands, the player seeks cures for the illnesses, at the same time having to earn a living and pay a psychoanalyst for help. Subsequent Froggy Software productions shared similarly pessimistic views of the world, mixing them with ironic authorial commentaries in textual form. In Le Breton's *Le Crime du Parking* (*The Parking Crime*; 1985), the player encounters several themes such as simulated rape, drug use, and homosexuality during an investigation into the brutal murder of a girl. In turn, Lanzmann's *La femme qui ne supportait pas les ordinateurs* (*The Woman Who Hated Computers*; 1985) comments on the situation of women using the contemporary French network Minitel, where they fall victim to anonymous male abusers. The more the player engages in conversation with men, the higher the risk that she will be subjected to sexual attacks. The conversation leads to one of the six endings, all of which are unlucky for the heroine. Thus, Lanzmann's work can be considered the first feminist digital game, through its perhaps controversial implication that computer technology is used to maintain male domination and power in society²⁰. Marion's *Même les pommes de terre ont des yeux* (*Even Potatoes Have Eyes*, 1985), also a feminine work, is a satire on South American dictatorships with references to French reality. The player, while struggling to overthrow a *junta*, gains public support by exclaiming such contradictory phrases as "J'accuse!"²¹ and "Je vous ai compris,"²² and abolishes coup d'état by committing another coup d'état. A more conservative ideological meaning arises from Cazenave's political fiction *Le Mur de Berlin va sauter* (*The Berlin Wall Will Explode*; 1986), in which the player tries to prevent a leftist homosexual terrorist from blowing up West Berlin.

Investigative Games

More historically decent were the investigative games of Cobrasoft, a studio founded by Bertrand Brocard in 1984. Brocard, as he claimed, started his programming career after the establishment of Octet²³. Contrary to the satirical and frivolous games of

¹⁹ Alistair Cole, "French Socialists in Office: Lessons from Mitterrand and Jospin", *Modern & Contemporary France* 1 (1999), pp. 71–87.

²⁰ See Jon Dovey, Helen W. Kennedy, *Game Culture* (New York: Open University Press) (2006), p. 80.

²¹ The title of the famous speech by Émile Zola, in defense of Albert Dreyfus, a victim of the anti-Semitic wave in France.

²² The title of the speech by Charles de Gaulle, who enforced the constitutional change in France in 1958.

²³ Alvaro Lamarche-Tolosa, Jordan Leclerc, *Entretien avec Bertrand Brocard*, 11 April 2016,

Froggy Software, Brocard's titles used carefully prepared historical material²⁴. Cobrasoft's games were more conservative in their political diagnosis, mainly criticising the Mitterrand government. One of Brocard's first titles, *Meurtre à Grande Vitesse* (*High-Speed Murder*, 1985), revolved around the murder of a radical French senator during his trip on a TGV train from Paris to Lyon. As one of the in-game characters says, the murder victim had denounced her to the Gestapo during the Second World War. One can see here a striking reference to the history of French collaboration with Nazi Germany; also, among the tertiary characters on the train, the player can see Mitterrand himself.

The success of *Meurtre à Grande Vitesse* encouraged Brocard to write several other investigative games alluding to political events. *Meurtres sur l'Atlantique* (*Murders on the Atlantic Ocean*, 1986), whose plot unfolds on a cruise ship sailing towards New York City in 1938, reconstructs the gloomy climate before the outbreak of the Second World War when the presence of Nazi spies was ubiquitous. In *Meurtres à Venise* (*Murders in Venice*, 1988), the player has to prevent a left-wing terrorist attack during an international summit in Venice, which in reality had taken place just two years before the game's release²⁵. In comparison to these games, *Dossier G: L'Affaire du Rainbow Warrior* (*The Case of Rainbow Warrior*, 1986, Cobrasoft) by Daniel Lefebvre referred to current affairs even more explicitly. This program documented the French intelligence service's sinking of the titular ship owned by Greenpeace near New Zealand. The action outraged public opinion when the media revealed that Mitterrand's government personally approved the sinking²⁶. However, when transposed onto the computer screen, these severe events were belittled by game critics. A *Tilt* reviewer mocked the program as a "non-game",²⁷ suggesting that the concept of serious games had yet to be accepted.

Indirect references to the French collaboration with Nazi Germany during the Second World War also appeared in *Le Manoir de Mortevielle* (*Mortville Manor*, 1987, Lankhor). The game, developed by Bruno Gourier and Bernard Grelaud, takes place in a mansion in the early 1950s. The main protagonist of the game, private detective Jérôme Lange, receives an invitation letter from his former friend Julia. When he arrives at the place, her funeral is just taking place. However, *Le Manoir de Mortevielle* slightly differs from a conventional 'whodunit' story: the main thread concerns not Julia's death (which, as it turns out, was natural), but the vanishing of her friend, Murielle. The player finds Murielle's rotten remains behind the allegoric "wall of silence" (*mur de silence*); no one in the family is willing to talk about her death. Only the head of the family, a historian who possesses the truth, tells the player that Murielle's death was the result of a tragic accident. Nevertheless, the historian has an

http://controverses.sciences-po.fr/cours/com_2016/jeuxvideos/retranscription-bertrand-b.pdf, date accessed 16 February 2018.

²⁴ Anonymous, "Le créateur du mois : Bertrand Brocard", *Tilt* 30 (1986), p. 18.

²⁵ The 13th summit of G7 ran in June 1987, on the Venetian island of San Giorgio Maggiore.

²⁶ Charles Bremner, "Mitterrand Ordered Bombing of Rainbow Warrior, Spy Chief Says", *The Times* (11 July 2005), p. 31.

²⁷ Anonymous, "Dossier G", *Tilt* 28 (1986), p. 41.

interest in erasing the memory of Murielle, just as in the 1980s, when common knowledge about the Vichy puppet state was still a national “repressed memory”.²⁸

Postcolonialism and Feminism

There were also games devoted to emerging subjects in cultural studies, such as postcolonialism. The economic exploitation of slaves from Africa took place in French-Caribbean colonies like Martinique, which became a bastion of post-colonial thought. Although pioneered by such philosophers as Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, the study of French postcolonialism in the 1980s grew in popularity thanks to Édouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau. Both were supporters of a more nuanced perspective on the European and African presence in the Caribbean, where both cultural spheres mingled in the so-called Creole culture. Muriel Tramis, an African-Caribbean female programmer from Martinique who worked in the Parisian software house Coktel Vision, was under Chamoiseau’s influence. She made her debut with two games thematically linked to the history of her homeland.

Mévil (1987, Coktel Vision) is set before the Montagne Pélee volcano eruption in 1902 which destroyed Saint-Pierre, the administrative centre of the island. The player explores several locations in Martinique, investigating people of various ethnic identities to solve a mystery surrounding past events. The titular Mévil was a slave murdered by his French master, who owned a sugar plantation near Saint-Pierre, where a real rebellion occurred in 1831. As the game unfolds, the player learns that the influence of colonialism on Martinique lasted long after the abolition of slavery in 1848. For example, a black Catholic priest rejects the practices of his ancestors and supports their oppressors, while a wealthy Creole complains that neither black nor white inhabitants accept them. The issues raised in *Mévil* are similar to Zygmunt Bauman’s reflection about identities:

The blacks of Martinique and Guadeloupe have to prove that their Frenchness requires no proof... By the most finical of fastidious standards, the blacks of Martinique and Guadeloupe are exemplary Frenchmen. To most exemplary Frenchmen, this is exactly what they are—black Martinicans and Guadeloupians passing for exemplary Frenchmen. Well, it is precisely this earnest effort to be exemplary Frenchmen that makes them the blacks of Martinique or Guadeloupe... The more they do to turn into something else than they are, the more they are what they have been called not to be²⁹.

Mévil reflects such issues of Martinican identity, and *Freedom* (1988, Coktel Vision) tries to reconstruct this identity, staging the aforementioned slave revolt in Saint-

²⁸ Eric Conan, Henry Rouso, *Vichy: An Ever-present Past*, trans. Nathan Bracher (Hanover and London: Dartmouth College) (1998), p. XII.

²⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press) (1997), p. 75.

Pierre. The game allows the player to initiate a slave revolt against a sugar plantation owner. The player's goal is to recruit warriors, swiftly infiltrate buildings where colonial officials are stationed and fight them in arcade sequences. Both games met with critical acclaim; for *Ménilo*, Tramis received the Silver Medal from the Ministry of Culture³⁰, and *Tilt* journalist Eric Caberia considered *Freedom* as the gaming equivalent of Arthur Penn's famous film *Little Big Man* (1970)³¹.

Having ceased the cooperation with Chamoiseau, Tramis moved into *erotica* with three games: *Emmanuelle* (1989, Coktel Vision), *Geisha* (1990, Coktel Vision), and *Fascination* (1991, Coktel Vision). As Tramis claimed in an interview for *PC Joker*, she aimed to question the traditional gaze of the male player and provide a feminine perspective on eroticism³². This perspective prevails in *Geisha* and *Fascination*, whose protagonists are female characters. The heroine of *Geisha* flies to Japan to find his girlfriend, abducted by a mad scientist who turns women into cyborgs. Similarly, the avatar of *Fascination*, Doralice, who works as a stewardess, becomes entangled in a dangerous affair involving a drug which turns men into sexual abusers. In both games, these are women who win their struggle to articulate their desires. Tramis returned to postcolonial themes with *Lost in Time* (1993, Coktel Vision), which once again featured Doralice, this time in a fight with a white supremacist who hates women and Afro-Caribbeans. The heroine symbolically defeats her villain by giving him an orchid, "a cross-cultural symbol of female sexuality",³³ whose smell makes him fall into the abyss.

Postcolonial themes also prevailed in Bernand Grelaud and Bruno Gourier's *Maupiti Island* (1990, Lankhor), an investigative game about the white people's colonial dominance. The central part of the game constitutes a conventional detective story involving the search for a treasure on the titular Polynesian island in 1954. Nonetheless, a secondary thread revolves around the last native inhabiting Maupiti. His death at the hands of a greedy white sailor contains a symbolic meaning recalling Paul Gauguin's paintings, where "the themes of lush exoticism and the death of a culture are linked, and the West is indicted for destroying innocence".³⁴ Nonetheless, in contrast to Tramis's games, the reference here is problematic, because *Maupiti Island* associates an indigenous person more with innocence than anti-colonial anger.

³⁰Bernd Zimmermann, Michael Suck, "Ein Cocktail, der es in sich hat!", *Aktueller Software Markt* 1 (1988), pp. 55–57.

³¹Eric Caberia, "Freedom", *Tilt* 61 (1989), pp. 134–135.

³²Anonymous, "Ein offense Gespräch mit: Muriel Tramis", *PC Joker* 1 (1993), p. 68.

³³Cristina Ferreira Pinto, *Gender, Discourse, and Desire in Twentieth-century Brazilian Women's Literature* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press) (2004), p. 131.

³⁴Robert Aldrich, *French Presence in the South Pacific, 1842–1940* (Place of publication not identified: Palgrave Macmillan) (2014), p. 6.

Science Fiction

After 1986, science fiction also became a highly used thematic genre in France. The primary source of its inspiration was an underground comics magazine *Métal Hurlant*, whose creators such as Philippe Druillet and Moebius were under the influence of the political events of May 1968³⁵. The background for this local science fiction was the defeat of Socialists in the 1986 parliamentary elections. During his first two years in office, the new conservative Prime Minister Jacques Chirac conducted partial denationalization of government institutions, reversing the Socialists' ambitious reforms. Although the Left regained power in 1988, Chirac's action had revealed the crisis of "the welfare state" and growing social disenchantment with political reforms. According to Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, French society in the late 1980s and early 1990s was less resistant to capitalism than in previous decades. Both sociologists paradoxically attribute responsibility for such a change to the May '68 generation, who had forgone the former stability of employment in favour of self-fulfilment and more creative work³⁶.

French science fiction, visually inspired by *Métal Hurlant* (despite the closure of the magazine in 1987), reflected the ongoing instability of everyday life. In Paul Cuisset's *Les voyageurs du temps* (*Time Travellers*; 1989, Delphine Software), the player assumes a role of window cleaner, whose frustration with his job goes hand in hand with the aggressive behaviour of his boss. The protagonist uses a secret time machine to find the epoch during which he will become a hero—the future. Similarly, in a cyberpunk game *B.A.T.* (1989, Ubi Soft) by Hervé Lange and Olivier Cordoléani, the player directs a cyborg who tracks down interstellar criminals in a dystopian reality. In the game, capitalism is an uncontrolled power instrument; the player needs to pay for everything (from food to healthcare), and the final financial support comes from a local financial magnate. Neal Tringham, in his anthology of science fiction digital games, regards *B.A.T.* as "an impressive piece of future noir [...] with a distinctly anti-capitalist tone"³⁷.

Games such as Philippe Ulrich and Didier Bouchon's *L'Arche du Captain Blood* (*The Ark of Captain Blood*; 1987, Ére Informatique) and Eric Chahi's *Another World* (1991, Delphine Software) maintained the same tone. Ulrich and Bouchon's game featured a programmer immersed in his world, where he wanders in search of his duplicates to destroy them. *L'Arche du Captain Blood*, apart from hallucinatory visuals inspired by H.R. Giger, contained an original interface which allowed the player to communicate with other encountered aliens by creating sentences from individual

³⁵Matthew Screech, "The Myth of May 1968 in *bandes dessinées*", *Bélphegor* 15:2 (2017), <https://journals.openedition.org/belphegor/1012>, date accessed 14 February 2018.

³⁶Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York – London: Verso) (2007), pp. 167–198.

³⁷Neal Tringham, *Science Fiction Video Games* (Boca Raton: CRC Press) (2015), p. 146.

symbols. The victory required an effective and non-violent communication of the aliens, who “are preoccupied with personal vendettas or desperation, genocide, extinction, war”.³⁸ The protagonist is also vulnerable: if the player does not kill the clones, his avatar slowly loses life and authenticity, becoming a Heideggerian “being-to-death”. Conversely, when the player accomplishes his task, his avatar finds internal peace. The game’s counter-cultural meaning can be shown during psychedelic sequences of flight, which resemble a narcotic trip. In *Another World*, whose visuals reveal the author’s inspiration by the images of Michael Whelan, Richard Corben, and Frank Frazetta³⁹, there is a similar self-referential motif: a lonely, detached scientist from contemporaneity is thrown into an alternate reality where he can trust only one specific alien. The vulnerable protagonist, having run through the unfriendly, unpredictable alternate world, eventually falls unconscious on the ground. *Another World*’s minimalistic design emphasized its counter-cultural meaning. The game featured no heads-up display, score, or game points. As Chahi said, “I wanted a visceral implication of the player, no distraction other than the world itself. No artificial motivation, which score is. Score’s a capitalistic view of gameplay, no?”⁴⁰

Horror

Social criticism was also present in some French horror games developed between 1985 and 1988. Although horror adventure games were scarce, their design overtook many contemporary titles at the time. Yannick Cadin’s *Zombi* (1986), the first game released by the still renowned studio Ubisoft, remediated a contestatory movie, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978, dir. George A. Romero), whose action takes place in a shopping mall. The player wanders around the shopping centre, fighting zombies and collecting fuel for a helicopter. However, the overall context of the game changed. While Romero’s film was read as a critique of consumerism⁴¹, the background for *Zombi* was also a series of terrorist attacks conducted in France by transnational terrorist groups, which targeted random civilians in cinemas, shops, and shopping malls⁴². Zombies in the game personified a violent threat from the Middle East, long before this kind of enemy became overused in post-9/11 films and digital games⁴³.

³⁸ J. Chastain, *Captain Blood (Atari ST)*, <https://mu-foundation.blogspot.com/2011/11/captain-blood-atari-st.html>, date accessed 14 February 2018; cited by Helen Lewis, “A videogames critical reader, by Liz Ryerson”, *The New Statesman*, 6 December 2012, <https://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2012/12/videogames-critical-reader-liz-ryerson>, date accessed 14 February 2018.

³⁹ The Retro Gamer Team, *The Making of Another World*, https://www.retrogamer.net/retro_games90/the-making-of-another-world/, date accessed 16 February 2018.

⁴⁰ Cf. Tristan Donovan, p. 134.

⁴¹ Stephen Harper, “Zombies, Malls, and the Consumerism Debate: George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*”, *Americana* 1:2 (2002), http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2002/harper.htm?pagewanted=all, date accessed 15 February 2018.

⁴² Didier Bigo, “Les attentats de 1986 en France : un cas de violence transnationale et ses implications (Partie 1)”, *Cultures & Conflits* 4 (1991), <https://journals.openedition.org/conflits/129>, date accessed 15 February 2018.

⁴³ See, for example, Anna Froula, “Prolepsis and the ‘War on Terror’: Zombie Pathology and the Culture of Fear

Not incidentally, *Zombi* became a highly attractive game and encouraged Ubisoft to release several other horrors, including *La Chose de Grottemburg* (*The Thing from Grottemburg*, 1987) and *Hurlements* (*The Howling*, 1988)⁴⁴.

A more nuanced take on horror themes can be found in *Infernal Runner* (1985, Loriciels), regarded as one of the first survival horrors⁴⁵, as Tringham defines them, “characterized by vulnerable protagonists attempting to escape from menacing and disturbing situations, almost always of a fantastic nature”.⁴⁶ The game, originally developed by Michel Koell and Yves Korta, is of a very depressive nature: the player seeks the keys to enter the exit from an industrial death labyrinth, where every game object can massacre his avatar. The ending is not uplifting, either. After exiting the labyrinth, the protagonist sees an ambulance driving towards him. He does not react, and consequently, he is run over. Not incidentally, the year 1985 marked the highest suicide rate in France in measured history⁴⁷. Therefore, *Infernal Runner*’s meaning is maintained not only in the Kafkaesque tradition of the grotesque and irony, where the protagonists are “sentenced to die” from the very beginning⁴⁸, but also in the social context.

Conclusion

The period between 1982 and 1993 in French digital game industry is a not very well-known episode in the international history of the medium. However, this article demonstrates that this period marked the release of various games which pioneered the international gaming industry in many aspects. Le Breton’s *Paranoïak* introduced the specific contemporary setting, while Lanzmann and Tramis brought feminist themes to digital games long before the Gamergate affair in the United States. The latter game designer represented the postcolonial point of view as well, which escaped even Souvik Mukherjee’s notice⁴⁹. The Anglo-Saxon historians, except for Tristan Donovan, do not seem to mention such niche voices.

in *28 Days Later...*, in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and “War on Terror”*, eds. Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula and Karen Rendall (Continuum: New York) (2014), pp. 195–208;

⁴⁴ Andre Willey, “Games, Games And More Games”, *Start* 3:8 (1989), https://www.atarimagazines.com/startv3n8/games_games.html, date accessed 15 February 2018.

⁴⁵ Eric Cubizolle, “Infernal Runner”, *Pix n’Love* 5 (2008), pp. 78–79.

⁴⁶ Neal Tringham, p. 311.

⁴⁷ Organization of Economic Growth and Development, “Health status – Suicide rates”, <http://data.oecd.org/healthstat/suicide-rates.htm>, date accessed 15 February 2018.

⁴⁸ Stanley Corngold and Benno Wagner state that the Kafka’s prose was deeply “suicidal”. Łukasz Musiał, while analyzing the ending paragraphs of *The Trial*, sees the Joseph K.’s acceptance of his fate as the desire to kill himself. Compare Stanley Corngold and Benno Wagner, *Franz Kafka: The Ghosts in the Machine* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press) (2011), pp. 47–48; Łukasz Musiał, *Kafka. W poszukiwaniu utraconej rzeczywistości [Kafka: In Search of Lost Reality]* (Wrocław: Atut) (2011), pp. 288–289.

⁴⁹ See Souvik Mukherjee, *Video Games and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* ([Place of publication not identified]: Palgrave Macmillan) (2017). Mukherjee’s book focuses mainly on the representation of Anglo-Saxon colonies in digital games, including his homeland India.

Meanwhile, despite the collapse of *Tilt* magazine, the French gaming industry nevertheless fully developed during the period. Such games as *Captain Blood* and *Another World* were international successes, and there was a field for further experiments in three-dimensional technology and full-motion video techniques⁵⁰. However, when some software houses such as Delphine Software and Lankhor fell apart in 2001, the early achievements of what we can call the “golden decade” of the French gaming industry were forgotten. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering how French games exposed their own culture before the Gallic industry became swallowed by the processes of globalization.

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⁵⁰ The mainstream fantastic games produced in France, such as *Alone in the Dark* (1992, Infogrames) and *Dune* (1992, Cryo Interactive), popularized the aforementioned technologies in the global gaming industry, while *Urban Runner* (1996, Coktel Vision) was an ambitious but flawed attempt to create an “interactive movie”.

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